



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Explaining the Facts of Life

Young children, often at age four, five, or six, will often ask their parent where babies come from. Making babies and sexual relationships are closely intertwined, and this question affords parents an opportunity to help their child develop a healthy sexuality. The recommendations of the Lucy Daniels Center mental health clinicians and educators that follow are based upon understanding the world through the eyes of a child.

Background issues: 4- through 6-year-old children are usually interested in sexuality, whether or not they ask questions. They are concerned with family relationships and their futures as parents and spouses. They understand adults produce children - after all, here they are! Furthermore, children understand in a general way that procreation involves bodies, even specifically involving genitals. This understanding is based on instinctive knowledge, like a baby knowing how to suckle. Every mammalian species has such knowledge, because sexuality is fundamental for species survival. Children also understand that genitals provide pleasure, on the basis of their own feelings. Children experience pleasurable feelings in their genital area, particularly during ages three through six, which is why many young children frequently masturbate directly or indirectly.

What to say: In our opinion, some of the common advice that experts provide about how to respond to children's sexuality is unhelpful. Parents have sometimes been encouraged to be extremely careful and to treat children's sexual questions differently than almost any other question. Imagine if we responded to other questions as we do to questions about sexuality. A child might ask, "Mommy, what makes cars go?" Her mommy would wonder, "What does she really want to know? Her driving future

depends upon my answering this just right." So, mommy might say, "Tell me what you would like to know about cars." Her daughter might realize that mommy was uncomfortable, and become cautious, saying, "Oh, like how do the wheels turn?" when she really had a broader curiosity. Her mother would provide an answer about axles, and her child might refrain from further questions, being left with an uncomfortable feeling about her automotive curiosity. Her mother might mistakenly conclude that the lack of subsequent questions indicated a satisfied curiosity. Mom might decide that it was time for her daughter to learn the whole truth about engines and read her a book about engines. Her daughter might wonder what it was about engines that required that her mom read a book rather than just talk to her.

We recommend that parents answer questions about sexuality as they would answer other questions, providing as much information as a child can understand. When a child asks how an automobile engine works, adults would not describe internal combustion because it is beyond a child's understanding. Similarly, when a child asks where babies come from, parents should not describe embryonic development or details of intimate relationships. We recommend that parents should simplify without being vague or incomplete. After all, the story is simple. Parents can say that babies start growing when two seeds come together. One seed grows inside a grown-up woman, and the other seed grows inside a grown-up man. When a man and woman decide to have a baby, grown-ups know how to put the man's seed inside the woman's body. The man's seed joins with the woman's seed, and the baby begins growing in the uterus or womb, a part of a woman's body. When the baby has grown enough, the baby enters the world through an opening called the vagina.

This explanation includes the role of both men and women, because if men are left out, the story is misleading and potentially confusing. This explanation provides a general framework but does not provide details about intercourse. If a child asks how the seed is put inside a woman's body, parents can explain that a man knows how to send this seed out in a special liquid through their penis into a woman's vagina. Parents would further support their child's developing sexuality by adding that men and women have good feelings and love for each other when they are making babies. This information helps children make sense of their own feelings and inborn knowledge, and can correct misinformation that may contribute to unhealthy

sexual development. Accurate information about sexuality, sensitively conveyed by a loved one without overstimulation or shame will always support development.

Following up: Perhaps in a few days after such a discussion, parents might ask their child to tell them what she or he remembers about their explanation. Children have a lot of feelings about sexuality, and they may misconstrue or change what their parents say. We suggest that parents relieve their child of the responsibility of asking all the questions; she or he may not know that they are supposed to ask the questions! Parents can specifically encourage additional questions. Using books are fine, but we recommend that parents only use them after they have had personal discussions. When used in this way, books can help children to understand and reinforce what their parent(s) has told them and can be a springboard for further discussion.

Parents sometimes worry what other parents might think if their child talks to another child about sexual facts. In this regard, it is worthwhile to remember that children are talking about sexuality among themselves all the time - the only real question is what kind of information they provide for each other. Isn't accurate information better than distorted or fantastical information? Also, parents needn't worry that children who know about sexuality will become prematurely interested or active. There is no clinical or research evidence that supports this concern. There are situations in which children are exposed to too much and are overstimulated; this is a problematic situation, but a completely different one and not to be confused with respectful, protected, warm, careful and non-stimulating factual discussions.

Therefore, we recommend an attitude that welcomes and supports children's interests in sexuality. With such an attitude, we believe that parents will be assisting their child's healthy sexual development, as well as their availability for discussion and communication about her or his sexuality as the years go along.